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ABSTRACT

In this lesson plan, students explore the cultural significance of masks. After exploring the world of African masks and storytelling, they create masks that tell stories of their own. In these six lessons, students first recall contexts in which masks are worn in the United States, and then discuss their use in stories. Students then investigate the role masks play in ceremonies and on special occasions in various African cultures. Students will see pictures of African masks online, pointing out similarities and differences between different regions. After discussing these impressions, students will hear several folktales from African cultures. Reading together will show how storytelling is used along with masks and costumes to pass on the society's values, morals, religion, and traditional and historical heritage. Finally, students will choose a familiar story and make simple masks to perform it. Intended for grades K-2, the lesson plan notes subject areas covered, time required to complete the lesson, skills used and taught in the lesson, and lists the standards developed by professional associations or governments that are related to the lesson. Activities to extend the lesson conclude the lesson plan. (SR)

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The Meaning Behind the Mask

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SEARCH EDSITEMENT

Introduction

It's masquerade time! From ritual dancers to superheroes, the many faces of masks are revealed in this lesson. After exploring the world of African masks and storytelling, your students will be eager to create masks that tell stories of their own.

In this unit, students explore the cultural significance of masks. After recalling some of the contexts in which masks are worn in the United States-e.g., Halloween, Mardi Gras, the circus, parades, plays, or costume parties-students discuss the use of masks in stories. Students then investigate the role masks play in ceremonies and on special occasions in various African cultures. Students will see pictures of African masks online, pointing out the similarities and differences between masks of different regions.

After a discussion of their impressions of the online masks, the students will hear several folktales from African cultures. Reading together will show how storytelling is used along with masks and costumes to preserve and pass on the society's values, morals, religion, and traditional and historical heritage. As students study each region, they will recognize similar cultural traditions and practices with those they have already studied.

Finally, students will have an opportunity to choose a familiar story and make simple masks to perform the story.

Guiding Questions:

What is a mask?
What is a mask used for?
Who wears masks?
When and why are masks worn?
How have you seen masks used before?
What story can a mask tell?

Learning Objectives

SUBJECT AREAS ▸

Literature & Language Arts: World

Literature & Language Arts: Drama

Art & Culture: Folklore

Art & Culture: Visual Arts

History & Social Studies: World

GRADE LEVELS ▸

K-2

TIME REQUIRED ▸

Part 1: One to two class periods, 45 minutes each

Part 2: One to two class periods, 45 minutes each

Part 3: One to two class periods, 45 minutes each

Part 4: One to two class periods, 45 minutes each

Part 5: One to two class periods, 45 minutes each

Part 6: Three to four class

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After this lesson, students will have:

- become aware of the social purpose and significance of cultural artifacts such as masks
- explored connections between cultures and societies - including American society - relating to their use of masks

Lesson Plan

1 Before the lesson, explore what students already know about masks and discuss how masks are used in the United States. Begin by asking students to name places and events where they have seen masks. Students might, for example, mention Halloween, Mardi Gras, the circus, parades, plays, or costume parties. Talk about how masks can also be used in stories. Explain that not all masks are "worn," that some masks are painted directly on the wearer or storyteller's face. Have students share occasions where they have seen masks directly painted on people's faces or when they have had their face painted. Ask students to recall what they felt when they saw these masks. Have students demonstrate facial expressions, e.g., happy, sad, scared, surprised, etc. An instant camera may be used to photograph and record students' expressions (useful later as mask prototypes). Label and display photographs.

Explain that people wearing masks are actually pretending to be the character. Emphasize that masks, like costumes, help people to tell stories by providing the audience with a way to tell the characters apart.

2 Next, present Africa as a continent of cultures with a rich history of masks. Although Africa is a huge region, masks are worn and used in village ceremonies throughout the continent. Masks often represent departed ancestors, spirit beings, and invisible powers. Mask features can be human, animal, or combine elements and features from the human, animal, and spirit worlds. Special significance is given to each decoration, carving, and painting on every mask. Many masks are combined with a headpiece so that the mask and headpiece cover the performer's head entirely. Masks are used in social ceremonies (weddings, funerals, etc.), seasonal celebrations, and religious events. They are used to tell stories, impart wisdom, and ask for spirit blessings and protections. Almost always, the dancers are men and the honor of dancing in these ceremonies is given to trained performers, important members of the community, or family clans.

periods, 45 minutes each

Extending the Lesson: Four to five class periods, 45 minutes each

Observation and description
Gathering, classifying, and interpreting written and visual information
Making inferences and drawing conclusions
Map reading
Collaboration
Public speaking and presentation

NCTE/IRA List of Standards for the English Language Arts

1. Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world. (more)
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. (more)

4

5

Performances include masked dancers dressed in detailed costumes and musicians who provide energetic and vibrant musical accompaniment.

Through EDSITEment, you can access many online resources where you can find more information about the African continent as background information:

- The EDSITEment-reviewed website African Studies WWW includes an Electronic Guide for African Resources on the Internet. Click on to view the Guide.
- Click on for resources related to the study of Africa from the Kennedy Center's "African Odyssey Interactive."
- Click on for country-specific pages about the different countries in Africa from the University of Pennsylvania's African Studies Center.
- For maps of African countries and information on specific African peoples, visit the EDSITEment-reviewed website Art and Life in Africa. Click on to access "Peoples Resources" or to access "Countries Resources."
- African Voices, an EDSITEment-reviewed website produced by the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of Natural History, explores African art, history, and political and social themes through essays, timelines, images, and games.

3 After these introductions on Africa, you are ready to see and explore African masks online. Hundreds of mask images are available through the Stanley Collection's Art and Life in Africa site. After entering the site, scroll down the main page and click on "Search the Stanley Collection of African Art Database." Under the "Type" section, select "masks" from the pull-down menu.

In some traditional African ceremonies, female masks are worn by men. Visit the EDSITEment-reviewed Detroit Institute of Arts website to view some of these masks. (Enter "African, Oceanic and New World Art" section from the main page, and then click on "Men Who Dance as Women.")

You may share these online resources by having students work at individual computer stations; by assigning small groups to share a number of computers; by displaying computer-projected images to the whole class; or by printing out images and distributing copies of them to students.

Show students a wide range of styles and qualities of masks, permitting their interests and observations to direct the presentation. For each mask they see, have them describe what the mask looks like (e.g., human, animal, child, funny, etc.). Have them speculate on what may have prompted the creation of the mask. In a story, what part might the person wearing this mask play?

4 Now introduce students to African folktales. Choose several folktales from African cultures to read aloud to the students (preferably the same or similar to the cultural origins of the masks viewed). For each story selection, ask if the story sounds like any folktale students have heard before. Have the students discuss the qualities of each character (e.g., was the character "good," "bad," "tricky," etc.). Discuss the

8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge. (more)

National Geography Standards

1. How to use maps and other geographic representations, tools, and technologies to acquire, process, and report information from a spatial perspective (more)

17. How to apply geography to interpret the past (more)

National Council for the Social Studies

1. Culture (more)
9. Global Connections (more)

National Standards for Arts Education

Theater Arts

2. Acting by assuming roles and interacting in improvisations (more)
3. Designing by visualizing and arranging environments for classroom dramatizations (more)
4. Directing by planning classroom dramatizations (more)
5. Researching by finding information to support classroom dramatizations (more)

setting and plot, identifying the story's "problem," and how was the problem solved. Ask students what have they learned from the story. Were the characters in the story different from us in any way? How does the story help them understand the culture (people) of the country being studied? What types of masks might be worn by each character? How might masks be used to tell this story?

There are numerous online resources for African folktales. Click on to find a valuable bibliography of print and online story resources from The African Odyssey Interactive. You'll find a selection of illustrated stories by clicking (animal stories) or (non-animal stories). Click on to access a link to "Folktales Around the World," where there is a section on Ghana. For a selection of African trickster stories, visit the EDSITEment-reviewed websites African Studies WWW and Art and Life in Africa.

5 Discuss and choose a familiar story with students in preparation for a class performance. Have students recall the folktales from Africa that they have heard. You may want to re-read some of the stories the students like best. Have the students tell how the stories are similar. Help guide the students' responses by suggesting that they identify the "good" characters and the "bad" characters; the story's problem and how the main character(s) helped solve the problem; and characteristics of the main characters (e.g., sneaky, foolish, mean, tricked, etc.).

Then ask students to recall folktales, fairy tales, or other stories that they already know. Encourage them to recall stories they may have recently read or have seen on video. (Stories might include "Chicken Little," "The Three Little Pigs," "Little Red Riding Hood," and "The Bremen Town Musicians." Videos might include: "Cinderella," "The Little Mermaid," "Pinocchio," "Snow White," etc.). Or they may have favorite stories that involve superhero-type characters. Encourage the students to recall the stories' settings, plots, characters, and the stories' problems.

6 Now, choose a favorite folktale or story to perform with masks. Using a story from the children's reading books or online sources, read the story selection to the students and review the details of the story.

Next, make character masks. A simple mask may be made using an oaktag circle about the size of a dinner plate with cut-out holes for eyes and a V slit for the nose (be sure to use another teacher or adult for cutting). Punch holes on either side of the mask and tie a piece of yarn, string, or elastic through the holes. Students can decorate the masks to depict the faces of the story characters. If possible, embellish the masks with feathers, beads, glitter, fabric, and other tactile materials. To wear the mask: Put the mask on and tie yarn, string, or elastic around the back of the head.

Assign parts and present a skit based on the chosen story, with students wearing their masks. Invite other classes or family members to view the students' performance.

Extending the Lesson

To approach the performance more formally:

- Have the students identify and list story characters.
- List story events in order of appearance.
- Create a script by having the students retell the story.

Visual Arts

4. Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures (more)
6. Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines (more)

View your state's standards

After the performance, conduct a circle discussion to review and evaluate the performance. Ask the students the following questions: How did they feel while performing? How did wearing masks affect the performance? Did the students feel as though they became the characters? Were the characters believable? How might music, singing, dancing, and/or props make the story even more believable? In what other ways do people pretend?